

## Key to the Aurelia S. Plath Shorthand Transcription Table from Correspondence in the Lilly Library Plath Archive Plath mss. II

by Catherine Rankovic

Poet Sylvia Plath's letters to her many correspondents were collected and published in two volumes as *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, vol. 1 (2017) and vol. 2 (2018). The originals of 696 letters Sylvia Plath wrote and mailed to her mother Mrs. Aurelia S. Plath, plus related letters, are preserved in the Plath mss. II collection at the Lilly Library, Indiana University at Bloomington, U.S.A.

The *Letters* volumes reproduce the text of Sylvia Plath's letters, but not the dozens of notes and comments Mrs. Plath hand-wrote on the letters she received from Sylvia and, after Sylvia died in 1963, on letters Mrs. Plath received from Sylvia's husband and friends. Mrs. Plath wrote some of her notes and comments in Gregg shorthand, and until 2012 no attempt had been made to transcribe them.

Transcription of the Gregg annotations provides context for Sylvia Plath's letters and sheds light on her family life and relationships. For example, from transcription we learn that Sylvia's letters to her mother were shared with her extended family – except for those Mrs. Plath marked in shorthand “Do not share!” Transcription reveals Mrs. Plath's private thoughts and fears about her daughter's or son-in-law's choices at the time they were made and sometimes in retrospect.

The Plath mss. II correspondence file spans the years 1938 to 1977, and the majority of Mrs. Plath's annotations are in plainly readable longhand. The first Gregg shorthand annotation appears on a 1948 letter Sylvia Plath wrote to her mother from summer camp. Plath scholar Catherine Rankovic found and transcribed a total of 159 shorthand annotations throughout the Plath mss. II correspondence and transcribed the annotations into the accompanying Transcription Table.

### The Transcription Table

The Transcription Table lists the Plath mss. II shorthand annotations in chronological order, starting with the letter written in 1948. The Table gives the letter's sender and recipient and the type of artifact, meaning letter or envelope, and where on the artifact to find the shorthand. The Table also specifies the instrument used to write the shorthand, and the color of the ink or pencil used. Columns in the Table record any unusual features, such as shorthand mixed with longhand or a shorthand note enclosed in a circle. In column “H,” the dates on the artifacts were matched with the letters as they are printed in *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*. If the letter was written by someone other than Sylvia Plath, column H shows the sender's name and the letter's date. Envelopes were occasionally postmarked a day or two after the letter was written. In this Table, letters and their envelopes were treated as separate artifacts.

Shorthand is solely a written language. For this reason, “translating” shorthand into its original language is correctly called “transcribing” it, and the result is called a “transcription.” An

individual shorthand symbol is called a “character.” A shorthand “character” usually represents a single word.

Rankovic transcribed the annotations to the best of her ability. Brackets indicate Rankovic’s insertions into the text. Brackets around one or more question marks indicate that a shorthand character or series of characters is illegible.

Transcriptions made by others are credited to their transcriptionists. Those who helped with the transcriptions or the Table are credited. The Table notes a few instances in which a scribble might look like shorthand but is not.

### **Gregg Shorthand and Mrs. Aurelia Plath**

Mrs. Plath, under her maiden name Aurelia Schober, had in 1928 graduated with a Bachelor of Secretarial Sciences (B.S.S.) degree from Boston University’s Practical College of Arts and Letters, a school that prepared women for secretarial careers. She learned to write Gregg shorthand during her first two years at the college. Mrs. Plath married in 1932, had daughter Sylvia in 1932 and son Warren in 1935, and was widowed in 1940. To support her children, in 1942 Mrs. Plath took a job teaching Gregg shorthand and other secretarial skills at the same college she had graduated from. Mrs. Plath worked there until her forced retirement in 1971.

By 1971 Sylvia Plath had become internationally famous for poems she wrote shortly before her death by suicide. Mrs. Plath began organizing Sylvia’s letters to her and typing up selected portions of these letters as a book manuscript. In the Plath mss. II we can see that Mrs. Plath often noted in those letters’ margins the date she typed them, such as “4/23/74,” or her decision to omit from the manuscript a letter or portion of a letter. All annotations made in shorthand appear in the Transcription Table. Mrs. Plath’s manuscript was published in 1975 as *Letters Home*.

Shorthand is a language of symbols designed for professional note-taking. Forms of shorthand, also known as stenography, have been used for centuries to record courtroom proceedings, and for business purposes, reportage and diaries. During most of the 20th century, employers preferred secretaries skilled enough to “take dictation” in shorthand at 120 words per minute. In the United States, Gregg shorthand, a phonetic system developed in the 1880s, outclassed competing shorthand languages because Gregg was the most efficient. It so dominated the business world that the generic word “shorthand” implied “Gregg shorthand.”

Recording and playback technologies specifically for business-office use reduced the demand for shorthand skills, with U.S. high schools and business colleges ceasing to teach shorthand in and around the 1980s, although shorthand is still valued in some professions and parts of the world.

People who have learned shorthand can find it useful in their personal as well as professional lives. That was the case with Mrs. Plath. Like handwriting, shorthand can be clearly and gracefully written or hard to read. Mrs. Plath’s Gregg shorthand annotations on the Plath mss. II are of textbook quality, befitting a professional shorthand instructor.

Sylvia Plath could neither read nor write Gregg shorthand. In the summer of 1953 she asked Mrs. Plath to teach her shorthand at home. After four lessons they both agreed to end the lessons. Sylvia Plath fictionalized this episode of her life in Chapter 10 in her novel *The Bell Jar*.

The shorthand on the Plath mss. II correspondence is the property of the Estate of Aurelia S. Plath. The Estate granted Catherine Rankovic written permission to publish the shorthand transcriptions for scholarly purposes. The transcriptions are copyrighted by Catherine Rankovic.

### **Frequent Correspondents in the Plath mss. II Transcription Table**

Aurelia Schober Plath (1906-1994) was the mother of Sylvia Plath and Warren Plath.

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was Aurelia's Plath's daughter, Warren Plath's sister, and Ted Hughes' first wife (m.1956). Sylvia was also the mother of Frieda and Nicholas Hughes.

Warren Plath (1935-) is Sylvia Plath's brother and was the husband of Margaret Wetzel Plath (m.1962).

Margaret "Maggie" Wetzel Plath (1938-1992) was Warren Plath's wife (m.1962).

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) was Sylvia Plath's husband (m.1956) and Aurelia Schober Plath's son-in-law. Hughes was the father of Frieda and Nicholas Hughes.

Olive Higgins Prouty (1882-1974), a novelist, was Sylvia Plath's benefactor and Aurelia Schober Plath's friend.

Richard Norton (1929-) dated Sylvia Plath in the early 1950s.

Carol Hughes (c.1949-) is Ted Hughes' second wife (m. 1970).